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The 15 July abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary developments throughout the world have been marked by post-truth politics. Epitomized by a disregard for truth coupled with a reliance on emotive arguments, the term ‘post-truth politics’ has not yet been adequately reflected upon by political or social theory. This article uses Turkey’s 15 July (2016) abortive coup as an entry point to address this gap and argues that the post-truth has altered both the grammar and vocabulary of politics. The term denotes the contemporary shift from a ‘regime of truth’ to a ‘regime of common sense’, which also operates as the discursive ground of new populisms. While treating three contending narratives of 15 July – ‘kamikaze coup’, ‘staged coup’ and ‘controlled coup’ – this article focuses on the post-truth elements in the government’s narrative performance that obstructed the pursuit of truth and set the conditions for a particular interpretation of the events of 15 July.

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Though many Turks believed that the era of coups was over, the initial months of 2016 were pregnant with rumours of an impending coup. In a rare statement on 31 March, the Turkish General Staff rejected such rumours and denied even the possibility of ‘any illegal action that is outside the command structure’ (Ergan 2016). Uneasy with the General Staff’s statement, Fuat Uğur, a pro-government columnist, wrote two successive columns in April that hinted at a Gülenist¹ putsch-in-the-making. Uğur further claimed that the state was aware of these preparations, but was waiting to catch the Gülenist officers in the act (Uğur 2016a, 2016b). In a few short months, Uğur would be proven right.

On the evening of 15 July, Turkey faced yet another putsch attempt in a long line of military interventions. Broadcast live on television and across social media networks, Turks watched the coup from start to finish: tanks rolling down city streets, fighter jets bombing the parliamentary building, top military officers taken hostage by their aides and resisting civilians gunned down by soldiers on the Bosphorus Bridge. However, despite this unprecedented public exposure, the events on 15 July remain shrouded in obscurity (Kingsley 2017). This article does not make any claim to providing the ‘true’ account of 15 July. Rather, it addresses and critically examines the discursive ground of circulating truth claims about the abortive coup and its implications for Turkish politics. To avoid *ex post facto* readings that already dominate the growing academic literature (Aktürk 2016; Yavuz and Koç 2016;

Yayla 2016), it offers an alternative framework and scrutinizes 15 July through the lens of ‘post-truth politics’, which defines contemporary political culture across countries and refers to when ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2016). In doing so, this article will not only promote critical discussion and a better conceptualization of Turkey’s 15 July abortive coup, but also offer an entry point through which to explore the motives and drivers of that new political culture. It first delineates the main attributes of post-truth politics while also discussing the explanatory value of the term. Thereafter, it will trace post-truth elements in the state-led process of cultivating and dominating the narrative of the 15 July coup. Finally, it concludes with a critical assessment of the official narrative (as compared to alternative ones) as well as how it shaped the subsequent course of events.

Post-truth politics: from regime of truth to regime of common sense

In his unrelenting theorizing of the power/knowledge nexus, Michel Foucault approached truth as a historical question to be scrutinized in connection with its practices and effects, which he termed ‘regime of truth’ (*régime de vérité*):²

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned [...]. (Foucault 1980, 131)

Implicit in this concept is the idea that truth is not innocent of power, on the contrary, it is constituted by power relations and operationalized as a structure of political control. In Foucault’s words, truth is ‘produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)’ (1980, 131–132). Nevertheless, the production and transmission of knowledge today are much more complex and fragmented than they were four decades ago. Neoliberal rationality, the advancements in information technology, the multiplication of means of mass communication, the fragmentation of news sources, the new world of participatory media and above all, the Internet are each pushing us to develop theories on the politics of truth.

The liberal optimism that saw the proliferation of more advanced information technology as a chance to expand the public sphere and form optimal public policies failed considerably (Graber 2003). In contrast to such expectations, the constant stream of fake news has eroded the quality and credibility of information in new media. Moreover, political polarization has been exacerbated in many contexts by the ‘echo chamber effect’, according to which social media users tend to only interact with like-minded people and are only shown content that reinforces their beliefs (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). Nevertheless, the current political landscape does not necessarily confirm Orwellian pessimism either, which warned about totalitarianism along with surveillance and repression enabled by digital developments (Tüfekçi 2017, xxviii). In this regard, whether explicitly named or not, inventing a new term like ‘post-truth politics’³ epitomizes the pressing quest to comprehend the contemporary dynamics of the power/knowledge nexus and to reconsider the present approaches.

Post-truth politics is neither about the denial of the big truth (as it is in the postmodern critique) nor truths stripped of facts. Instead, it refers to the brazen disregard for facts while representing ‘a reliance on assertions that “feel true” but have no basis in fact’

(*The Economist* 2016). Associated with rising populist movements, this catchword was anchored in mainstream media during 2016 presidential election and Brexit campaigns in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), respectively. With good reason, the Oxford Dictionaries even announced ‘post-truth’ as the 2016 word of the year.

Already marked by similar terms, such as ‘truthiness’, ‘alternative facts’ and ‘post-fact’, this new phenomenon has flourished for two reasons. First, it relies on the erosion of public trust in expert opinion, evidence-based policy and liberal democratic values. For example, during the Brexit referendum, Britain’s former Minister of Justice Michael Gove exclaimed, ‘People in this country have had enough of experts’, which typifies the widespread contempt for evidence and expert analyses in the wake of the Brexit campaign. Such views have been pushing contemporary politics into a realm where ‘ignorance [...] is seen as an actual virtue [and] to reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy’ (Nichols 2017, x). The second is the deluge of facts, as citizens are encircled by millions of channels, newspapers, websites, blogs and social media feeds creating an information – or misinformation – overload. Post-truth politics has indeed given rise to fact-checking and promise-tracking initiatives to determine the veracity of the news and claims in circulation. Nevertheless, under an oversupply of ‘facts’, conformism facilitates cherry-picking information that enables one to arrive at favourable conclusions. Many people filter and customize their newsfeed in social media, leading to a vicious, seemingly unbreakable cycle in which each congruent news item not only fits, but also reinforces their pre-existing views (Sunstein 2017). Thus, in the post-truth era, everyone is entitled not only to their opinion, but also to their facts.

Those who embrace the term ‘post-truth politics’ also agree that the arrival of new media alone cannot count for the change in the regime of truth. Jayson Harsin, for instance, points to marketing, neoliberal changes and the ‘attention economy’ as the main drivers of post-truth politics. In his framing, Foucault’s regimes of truth are now replaced by ‘markets of truth’, which regulate not only bodies and discourses, but also attention itself through big data analytics and rich communication strategies (2015, 4–6). Likewise, Jonathan Hopkin and Ben Rosamond underscore the rise of neoliberal rationality, which individualized political action and put ‘a cognitive burden’ on citizens’ shoulders to make sense of the political complexities around them. A new genre of actors filled the political void with a discourse falling short of intellectual substance and remaining impervious to facts (Hopkin and Rosamond 2017, 2).

Opponents of the term ‘post-truth politics’ argue that politics has never been about truth-telling and that the debate suffers from a presentist bias. Indeed, Arendt’s infamous statement on how totalitarian states promote citizens resilient to the facts still reverberates:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist. (1973, 474)

Nevertheless, the threshold of indifference towards the erosion of the very foundation of political debate has even been reached in well-established democracies. Entrenched in neoliberal rationality and catalyzed by the proliferation and fragmentation of news sources, post-truth politics alters both the grammar and vocabulary of politics. This is because the ideological premises or policy-driven debates are now being replaced by a commonsense politics that is mastered to perfection by new populisms (Mudde 2004, 547). Based on the decay of the authority of scientific and evidence-based truth, post-truth politics cannot be fully grasped by referring to a ‘regime of truth’ in which “‘truth” is centered in the form of

scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it' (Foucault 1980, 131). Closer to Gramscian thinking, it is instead a regime of common sense that establishes the ideas and values of political leadership as a universal and self-evident reality. Common sense politics begins when events seem to speak for themselves, without the need for any fact-based interrogation. Populist leaders are particularly inclined to fashion common sense by lionizing the gut feelings of citizens, discrediting sources of factual knowledge (e.g., the media and scientific institutions)⁴ and filling the mediascape with narratives obfuscating the truth. Orthodox measures to control the flow of information, such as censors and surveillance, may continue, but the post-truth element is located somewhere beyond their reach: by spreading rumors, disseminating fabricated content and pouring conspiracy theories into national media outlets, post-truth politics tends not only to create intuitive forms of truth or common sense, but also to generate significant levels of doubt, neutralize the facts of others and ultimately to make 'available information unusable' (Tüfekçi 2017, xxix).

In addition to casting aside evidence-based facts, post-truth politics also employs alternative vocabularies. As common sense overtakes the authority of evidentiary truth, so does emotion over reason. Thus, post-truth politicians resort to symbolic codes and narratives assumed to appeal to the beliefs and emotions of the public. They mobilize affective discourses of pain, loss or hatred and peddle narratives of hate and fear while paving the way for conspiracy theories to occupy centre stage. Free from the constraints of evidence or reality, politicians use or manufacture crises and fan fears of real or imagined enemies to declare themselves saviours of the nation. In an attempt to fashion genuine connections with citizens, contemporary populisms in particular thrive on cultural discontent and economic impoverishment while promising 'to "take back control" and put "us" in charge of "our destiny"' (Clarke and Newman 2017, 107). However, post-truth politics should not be conflated with political lies. Unlike traditional propaganda and lies that acknowledge and try to hide the truth, post-truth politics has more affinity with 'bullshit', in Harry Frankfurt's words, which is a deliberate misrepresentation and is immune to scrutiny against empirical evidence (2005). Obfuscation of truth, rather than substitution, drives post-truth politics. Frankfurt relates this to the displacement of the ideal of 'correctness' by another, 'sincerity', which considers human nature and gut-feeling as a more reliable guide than facts (2005, 65).

While refraining from the assertion that politics has never been vulnerable to such traits, this article underpins the 'post-truth' as the hallmark of contemporary politics and the discursive ground of new populisms hollowing out democracies across the globe. Although it has become a buzzword, hindering further sophistication, the term signals a change in the power-knowledge nexus that demands exploration. Henceforth, this article scrutinizes how post-truth politics, through a disregard for truth and reliance on emotion-laden narratives, drove political discourse on the 15 July abortive coup from newspaper headlines to official speeches and court proceedings and dominated the course of events in Turkey.

The coup night

For Turks, who consider military intervention as only a matter of the past, it was hard to grasp whether the events of 15 July were real or not. Shortly after 22:00 on 15 July 2016, two F-16 fighter jets took off from the Akinci Air Force Base and made several low passes over Ankara. Meanwhile, some 30 soldiers blocked the two bridges across the Bosphorus in Istanbul. The plotters kidnapped top military leaders, including Chief of the General Staff

Hulusi Akar, and deployed squad-sized units to central locations. Air assaults, meanwhile, targeted Parliament, the Special Operation Forces, the National Intelligence Organization and the Presidential Palace. At 24:00, putschists storming the offices of TRT, the state television channel, forced the presenter to read out the coup declaration on behalf of the ‘Peace at Home Council’ (*Yurtta Sulh Konseyi*), a reference to Kemal Atatürk’s maxim ‘peace at home, peace in the world’. At 00:28, President Erdoğan, vacationing in Marmaris on the Aegean coast, conducted a live interview on CNNTürk via FaceTime and urged his supporters to defy the curfew declared by the junta and to take to the streets. He took off from the nearby Dalaman Airport and landed in Istanbul at 03:20. A squad of putschists in Marmaris attempted to storm Erdoğan’s hotel, but that was after Erdoğan’s departure. By 09:00, loyal forces in the military had nearly succeeded in thwarting the coup and taken approximately 1400 soldiers into police custody. Members of the senior command were also released (*Strategic Comments* 2016). By the time the government regained full control, the death toll climbed to 249 with nearly 2,200 others wounded.

In his FaceTime address, Erdoğan directly blamed his ally-turned-foe Fethullah Gülen and his followers for orchestrating the plot. Erdoğan’s AKP and the Gülenists had an enduring marriage of convenience throughout the 2000s, with the political power of the former and the social and bureaucratic power of the latter serving as mutually beneficial. The two worked in harmony throughout the 2008 Ergenekon and 2010 Sledgehammer Trials, as well as the 2010 Constitutional Referendum, which broke the secular hold on the military and judiciary, respectively. However, this collaborative relationship between Erdoğan and Gülen turned into a brutal fight once the secular establishment, their common enemy, was neutralized (Taş 2017). In December 2013, when the corruption scandals involving Erdoğan’s entourage broke out, Erdoğan defined the probe as a ‘judicial coup’ launched by the Gülenist ‘parallel state’, which led him to rotate or remove thousands of police officers, judges and prosecutors from their posts. The pro-government media began pointing at the next target, the Gülenists in the army, who ironically multiplied during the AKP era (Özkan 2016). Amidst news of an impending major operation into Gülenist military officers, 15 July was then a ‘kamikaze coup’, a last resort for Gülenists, who were forced to use their most critical arsenal in this all-out-war with the AKP government (Erez 2016). A significant amount of circumstantial evidence pointed to Gülenist involvement in the coup attempt. Gülenists’ past infiltration into the military, the presence of some civilian Gülenists in the military headquarters on the coup night and the use of Bylock, a secure messaging app, were just a few of many (Oğur and Kenar 2017). The vigorous post-coup investigations over the following months persecuted tens of thousands of suspects – from top generals to baklava-producers – for membership in the alleged Gülenist Terror Organization, or ‘FETÖ’, a term the government coined to refer to the now-outlawed Gülen Movement.

Nevertheless, from the outset, several academics and journalists hinted at the inconsistencies and loopholes in the official storyline as well as the lack of conclusive evidence (Cizre 2016; Jenkins 2016; Yıldız 2017; Yılmaz 2016). These include, among others, Erdoğan’s conflicting statements on how and when he learned of the coup, and the meetings between Hulusi Akar, Chief of the General Staff, and Hakan Fidan, Head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT – *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı*), at military headquarters the day before and on the day of the coup. The mysterious role of Adil Öksüz, a Gülenist theology professor and prime suspect detained at Akıncı, only to be released two days later, further compounded confusion. The question was also raised as to whether or not the coup could have been

thwarted with fewer civilian casualties. Likewise, the official story, as reported in many quasi-official publications, leaves out the details of the seven hours after a Turkish Army major tipped off the coup preparations to the MIT (Stein 2017). Despite numerous trials and mass arrests, many questions remain about 15 July, including even the most basic ones, such as what the organizational chart and action plan looked like and what the junta's plan was in the event that the coup succeeded.

Who needs evidence?

Having thwarted a coup attempt, one could plausibly assume that AKP would comb through the evidence gathered and reveal the truth of 15 July. Instead, AKP demonstrated an apparent disdain for facts and employed various means to obstruct the pursuit of truth and maintain its monopoly over the narrative of the abortive coup. AKP could realize this goal with little effort, as it had already proliferated across the media, judiciary and other arms of the bureaucracy, which it staffed with party loyalists (Eissenstat 2017, 8).

The attempts to obstruct the proper discussion and investigation of 15 July were most evident in the media. The government already held a firm grip over nearly the entire sector – it had seized the most critical outlets and beat the remaining into submission through financial and judicial threats. The situation further deteriorated after the coup. As of May 2017, some 200 media outlets were shut down and 167 journalists put behind bars for their alleged links to a terror organization (P24 2017). In addition, restrictions on social media such as domain blocking, URL blocking and regional internet shutdowns became even harsher (Yesil and Sözeri 2017). Well-sourced, calm, investigative journalism was considered undesirable and would result in targeting by social media trolls as ‘putschist’ or ‘FETÖcü’ (‘member of FETÖ’), unemployment and even imprisonment.⁵ Leaving aside the aggressive rejection of any view contesting the official narrative, even pro-government columnists expressing their concerns about the handling of the post-coup period were harshly thwarted by hardliners, who called themselves *Hakiki reisçiler* (genuinely pro-Chief, i.e., pro-Erdoğan, loyalists). Although the government controlled most of the national media in one way or another and enjoyed *vorherrschende Meinungsmacht* (prevailing opinion power), the reporting of the coup attempt was curtailed by successive legal measures. In August, court decisions 2016/2704 and 2016/4189 prohibited the media from reporting on suspects’ testimonies or on the developments at the Dalaman airport, respectively. Later that year, a similar ban restricting reporting was placed on the coup probe by court decisions 2016/34,441 and 2016/1231.

Still another realm of narrative control was the parliament, in which the proper investigative channels were blocked. President Erdoğan did not welcome the motion submitted by opposition parties to establish a parliamentary commission to investigate the coup attempt. For Erdoğan, it was ‘more than obvious’: Events spoke for themselves and no further proof was needed (TRT Haber 2016). Hence, this effort in the parliament was derailed and ultimately turned into a stillborn endeavour by the ruling party’s manoeuvres. To this end, AKP delayed appointing members to the commission until the last day and the AKP-affiliated Head of Parliament, İsmail Kahraman, did not allow the commission to work during the summer recess (Bozkurt 2016). When the commission finally convened on 4 October (almost three months after the coup attempt), AKP dominated all key positions. Now able to determine whom to invite for their testimony, Chairman of the Commission Reşat Petek

decided not to hear any evidence from two critical actors, Hulusi Akar and Hakan Fidan. Moreover, Petek did not allow any testimony from putschists in jail. Eventually, most of the commission hearings were limited to the history of the Gülenist expansion in the state rather than shedding light on the coup itself. Without providing a general picture about 15 July and plans for its aftermath, the commission abruptly ended its work on 4 January 2017 at the behest of President Erdoğan (*Cumhuriyet* 2017a). Opposition parties raised their concerns as to whether the commission was indeed used to cover up the truth of the coup because despite widespread purges, arresting even housewives for terror links, the commission report did not single out any name from the so-called ‘political leg’ of the organization, which would implicate several AKP members. The parliament rather obstructed a second attempt by the opposition to establish a new commission to investigate the political links of Gülenists (*Cumhuriyet* 2017b).

Deluge of conspiracies

The obstructive means of narrative control thus far were considered politics-as-usual in Turkey. However, the post-truth dimension of this process is more visible in the ways in which AKP tended to inundate the national media with its own truth claims. While refraining from evidence-based debates, the government fostered a flood of conspiracy theories, fake news, rumours across thousands of traditional and social media channels that were meant not only to counter and neutralize fact-based truths/questions, but also to construct common sense knowledge on the abortive coup.

From 15 July on, the AKP-controlled media only released materials selectively leaked by the government and re-circulated statements by party leaders. Erdoğan himself delivered hour-long speeches on various occasions, all of which were broadcast live. In addition to these efforts were the exhaustive labours of embedded scholars, journalists and Gülenists-turned-confessors, hosted by televised debate programs, which failed to interrogate the most basic questions on the coup and its imagined future. By eliminating the plurality of voices in the media and overwhelming the Turkish public with one-sided news, the ruling party was making its narrative singular. After all,

[The] Turkish public, trying to make sense of the coup attempt, eager for TV news, were overwhelmingly exposed to narratives, either in the form of news or debates, provided by the government party, which were not sufficiently challenged either by opposition party representatives or by the mainstream news media. (Akin 2017, 523)

For those relying on national media, there was only one narrative imposed by the government and amplified by its embedded media outlets. Accordingly, 15 July was a Gülenist plot with the backing of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Cizre 2016). Indeed, this argument is not too far-fetched considering both the US support of previous military interventions in Turkey and the Gülenists’ war of attrition with the AKP (Aslan 2018; Yavuz and Koç 2016). Nevertheless, blocking proper discussion of the evidence available, AKP instead resorted to the conspiratorial rhetoric of a liberation war being waged against Western imperialists and their in-house proxies. Fuelled by emotive arguments rather than factual statements, this narrative made its debut in party discourse during the 2013 Gezi protests. When responding to the Gezi opposition, the AKP elite borrowed this populist rhetoric of liberation war from anti-Western Kemalists called *Ulusalcı*,⁶ but strengthened it with

Ottoman and religious sentiments.⁷ Now, 15 July provided a golden opportunity to buttress that rhetoric.

Across AKP circles, it was argued that 15 July was a NATO-sponsored coup attempt to enforce pro-Western regime change. President Erdoğan declared that the coup was ‘done by foreign powers’ and ‘the scenario was written outside of Turkey’ (Withnall and Osborne 2016). The Labour Minister Süleyman Soylu was more direct, stating that ‘the United States was behind the coup’ (*Yeni Şafak* 2016a). AKP deputy Şamil Tayyar followed suit by calling NATO a ‘terror organization’ and suggested that Turkey leave the alliance (Doğan 2017). These political statements were accompanied by sensational conspiracy theories across pro-government media outlets. On 25 July, for instance, the pro-government daily *Yeni Şafak* targeted retired American General John F. Campbell for orchestrating the coup (2016b). This continued the following day with accusations that Henry Barkey, an academic and former US State Department official, organized ‘a clandestine meeting’ in Istanbul on the night of the coup (2016c). These scattered references are usually brought under an umbrella narrative of *üst akıl* (mastermind), which is determined to obstruct Turkey’s rising power and prosperity. While such references to *üst akıl* are available in the post-coup indictments (Attorney General of the Republic for Ankara 2016, 241), these unsubstantiated claims also gained much traction in the public sphere. According to research carried out in December 2016, 76% of Turks believe that outside powers, particularly the US, were ‘behind the terror of the PKK, ISIS, and FETÖ’ (*Aydınlık* 2017).

Turkish confidence in US complicity was nourished by distrust, deteriorating relations and resentment towards the US and European countries due to their ongoing operations in Iraq and Syria. The continuing residence of Gülen, the alleged instigator of the coup, on US soil only reinforced this conviction. The distrust, however, runs much deeper and the government actively promoted a politics of insecurity, which galvanized decades-old fears that Turkey was under threat of invasion by foreign powers. More than a coup attempt to overthrow the government, 15 July appeared in AKP’s narrative as the clearest manifestation of Western assault on Turkey (Afyoncu 2016a). According to Erdoğan, 15 July was reminiscent of the conditions that paved the way for Turkey’s Liberation War (1919–1922) and only ‘aimed to prepare the way for the occupation of the country by dismantling these institutions [Parliament], which are representatives of the national will’ (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2016a). Likewise, *Yeni Şafak* Editor-in-Chief İbrahim Karagül blamed the US and Europe for working on a scenario to prepare for the invasion of Turkey. For Karagül, 15 July was part and parcel of this scenario and the larger Crusade that aimed for complete occupation of the region since the 1991 Gulf War (2016). Fuelling anti-Western sentiments and peddling ever-elusive conspiracy theories, the government thrived on Turks’ *Sèvres Syndrome*, the fear that Turkey is encircled by enemies within and without, with outside powers trying to weaken and divide the country.⁸ Along with his West-bashing, Erdoğan put religious flesh onto this concept and described the post-coup process as ‘a clash between the cross and the crescent’ (*Türkiye* 2017).

In this conspiracy-laden rhetoric, Gülenists appear as a well-organized, sinister group that deployed its well-trained human capital and managed to hide itself within the state apparatus for four decades. At other times, they instead appear as an irrational, esoteric cult composed of a ‘charlatan’ and his ‘mankurt’ [unconscious slave] followers (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2016a). Nevertheless, one thing was clear, each story portrayed Gülenists as pawns of Western powers. Exploiting the religious-nationalist sentiments of the country’s conservative

Sunni majority, AKP officials mobilized noticeable, emotionally charged symbols and routinely argued that Gülen was a Jew, Armenian or an agent of the Vatican (Kılıçdağı 2016; Ramoğlu 2016).⁹ The most iconic image was from the booklet 'July 15: The Attempt to Occupy Turkey', which was written by history scholar Erhan Afyoncu and distributed by the government to all schools (2016a). Augmenting the pejorative effects of the Crusader image in the Turkish imaginary, the cover page depicted Gülen as a Christian priest leading the Trojan horse of the Crusades into the country (Figure 1). Earlier, Afyoncu also suggested that although the Turks thwarted all past Crusader attacks, 'Europe has always found new servants as tools for revenge' and Gülen is just a new face of the Crusades 'in this everlasting



Figure 1. Cover of Booklet '15 July 2016 – Attempt to Occupy Turkey via the Coup', courtesy of DHA.

war' (Afyoncu 2016b). In broader terms, this rhetoric depicting 15 July as a Crusader attack to occupy Turkey clearly resonates with the general public. According to a recent survey conducted in November and December 2017, 77.6% of Turks see a 'Crusader spirit' in European powers' approach to Turkey (Center for Migration Research 2018).

In the post-coup era, the Turkish audience is flooded by news hinting that foreign powers and their Gülenist collaborators were behind all the troubles and controversies of the country – from the 2015 shooting down of a Russian jet to exchange rate fluctuations. On top of that, the AKP elite also promoted many full-blown conspiracies, e.g., that Gülen was plotting artificial earthquakes to damage the Turkish economy or that he will take over the US (Butler 2017). The cumulative effect of this never-ending conspiratorial news boom was dizziness among the Turkish audience, which made it more and more difficult to make sense of 15 July. On the one hand, many figures with no attachment to Gülen, ranging from openly anti-Gülenist figures like journalists at *Cumhuriyet* daily to the Mayor of Rotterdam, were accused of Gülen links (*Daily Sabah* 2017). On the other hand, in a never-ending cycle, prosecutors overseeing coup investigations were themselves dismissed over alleged coup links. In the fog of conspiracy-driven news, this adversarial campaign paralysed plausible thinking and reinforced the popular conviction of being encircled and besieged by Gülenists. Eventually, this politics of fear drove all sorts of perceptions. Any critical insight to the government's unquestionable narrative was blamed and indeed investigated for *algı operasyonu* (perception management) or sending subliminal messages about the coup. Moreover, conspiracies repeating 'FETÖ', 'traitors', 'CIA', 'coup' or 'occupation' and linking them together gave way to common sense knowledge of 15 July that addressed the frustration and confusion of Turkish society. The success of this strategy, alongside other factors, is evident in the 'unequivocal acceptance by the Turkish masses of the Erdoğan regime's utter contempt for the Gülen movement' (Cizre 2016).

Gradually it became conventional wisdom to view 15 July in light of the recurrent metaphor of a liberation war waged against Western imperialists and their Gülenist collaborators. Beyond offering reductionist templates for complicated realities, this common sense politics yields several political effects. First, it enables the government to rebrand any challenge against itself and Erdoğan as an assault targeting the whole country. Whoever loves the country is then supposed to align with them wholeheartedly against the enemies of the people. Secondly, any opposition or challenge becomes part of a larger conspiracy. Hence, AKP projected the Gezi Protests as a 'civilian coup', the 2013 graft probe as a 'judicial coup' and the rapid devaluation of the Turkish lira vis-a-vis the US dollar in late 2016 as an 'economic coup', all in the service of some foreign powers trying to sow chaos in Turkey. Thirdly, totally unrelated opposition groups and actors were categorized under one banner as in-house proxies all serving the same Western masters despite their varied appearances. By showing diverse critical voices in alliance, the pro-government dailies validated an adversarial mind-set that simplifies the fragmented texture of Turkish society and politics while also projecting a polarization between AKP and those who obstruct the march of Turks to greatness. Fourthly, the metaphor of liberation war makes all the political or socio-economic problems or expectations secondary to the survival of the nation (*milletin bekası*). This subverts the need to address the shortcomings of AKP politics, pre-empts any kind of criticism and demands uncritical loyalty to the government in its holy war against evil. Finally, the government thrives on making the war appear larger, so that it could undertake more draconian measures and centralize power. This thick and pervasive scaremongering

campaign with the recurrent theme of ‘Western powers and Gülenist traitors trying to weaken Turkey’ disempowers people and creates a sense of desperation and fear from an all-powerful spectre haunting the country. Simultaneously, however, it calls for a strong leader as the saviour of the nation. Thus, in the hands of the populist elite, the victimhood rhetoric emanating from 15 July becomes a political commodity that translates a sense of powerlessness into brute force – asking for compensation with an iron fist while blocking sound reasoning and taking stock of the political situation. This narrative overwhelmed the public with a deluge of emotion-laden conspiracies in the pro-government media. Erdoğan would use this post-coup trauma when campaigning for the April 2017 constitutional referendum, which brought about a presidential system he long sought.

In search of a lost empire

The AKP narrative was not only about fear or hatred, but also joy and pride for the people’s victory over the tanks. The idea of thwarting a coup created a well-deserved sense of euphoria among Turks, who experienced military intervention nearly every decade. The continuous public gatherings in city squares, called ‘Democracy Watch’, kept that ecstatic, vigilant spirit alive (Figure 2). The heroic resistance of Turkish people at Erdoğan’s request was also revived in a regular stream of emotion-laden tales of personal tragedies and traumas in the national media. Civilians who lost their lives that night were accorded official ‘martyr’ status and 15 July was presented as a ‘glorious resistance’ or ‘great revolution’



Figure 2. Every night after the coup attempt, people gathered in public squares to keep a ‘Democracy Watch’; photo by Mstyslav Chernov, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:After_coup_nightly_demonstration_of_president_Erdogan_supporters._Istanbul,_Turkey,_Eastern_Europe_and_Western_Asia._22_July,2016.jpg.

comparable only to the American and French Revolutions (Yayla 2016, 169). The liberation war rhetoric thrived on the romanticization and glorification of the people's defence as the real force that thwarted the coup, which was iconized by images of citizens blocking the path of tanks. Accordingly, the Turkish people not only stood against the tanks, but also broke the 'big game' over the country that was instigated by Western imperialists and their in-house collaborators.

Nevertheless, amidst the historical euphemisms and abundant references to the Liberation War, the Treaties of Sévres or Lausanne, historicity is lost. For instance, when Erdoğan stated that '15 July is the second War of Independence for the Turkish nation. Let us know it like that. They [threatened] us with Sèvres in 1920 and persuaded us to [accept] Lausanne in 1923', the distance between the past and present vanishes (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2016b). In AKP rhetoric, which dismisses the Republican era as a mere parenthesis,¹⁰ it all becomes about restoring the glorious Ottoman past. Already discontent with the regime and boundaries of the Turkish Republic, this war could be a second opportunity to save and make 'the empire great again.' Indeed, for Erdoğan, 'World War I has not yet ended', so the immediate task of saving the empire is there and constitutes a vigilant mode of being (2017). This rhetoric was emboldened by several popular Turkish television series on Ottoman sultans, be it Osman Bey or Abdulhamid II, mostly revolving around Turks' awakening and the struggle against enemies of the nation (Armstrong 2017). Through references to Ottoman glory, an illusionary sense of empowerment compensates for present political impotence. It flatters Turks, boosts self-esteem and ultimately, an imperial fantasy dominates thinking about the coup attempt and its aftermath.

Already framed as the second liberation war, 15 July arises as the founding moment of 'New Turkey', which would reclaim the lost glory of the Ottomans. Erdoğan's ambition to challenge the Kemalist regime through his ideal of 'New Turkey' is not new, but now this ideal was consecrated with 15 July and its martyrs. The national history in textbooks was revised, now with less space for Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, and considerable emphasis on the glory of 15 July. While highlighted and ritualized by commemorative practices like 'martyrs' corners' or theatrical plays at schools, 15 July was officially proclaimed as Democracy and National Unity Day. The Bosphorus Bridge was renamed as the 15 July Martyrs' Bridge and many streets were given the names of the martyrs (Özyürek 2016). The AKP also ordered the erection of 15 July memorials in all districts (Şahan 2017). All these served to freeze time, keeping memories of 15 July alive in the present. While valorising patriotic emotions, the cult of martyrdom promoted the re-configuration of Turkish national identity and has encouraged a sentimental interpretation of the coup that makes any factual challenge to the story difficult.

The new founding moment also sanctifies Erdoğan, now more commonly called 'the Chief' (*Reis*), as the founding father. While city centres were covered with huge posters of Erdoğan along with Turkish flags, his hagiographies like the film *Reis* or the documentary *Erdoğan, Man of the Nation* aired throughout the country. The lines of poetry often recited by Erdoğan became popular mottos of the coup, which exalted the President as the chosen one with a divine mission and protection ['Whatever they do is meaningless, there is a judgment that comes down from the heavens']. In fact, Erdoğan himself provided stories for his lionization. For example, he likened his escape from the putschists at the Dalaman Airport to the protection of Prophet Mohammad during the holy migration *Hijrah* (Sözcü 2017). After 15 July, the solidifying of Erdoğan's untouchable cult of personality reached

a point that a bus steward was detained after using a scrap of newspaper with Erdoğan's picture to dry the wet mat on the bus floor (*Birgün* 2017).

Contending narratives

The government's narrative of a 'kamikaze coup' gained wide acceptance in Turkish society. According to a poll conducted in the immediate aftermath of the abortive coup, 47% of Turks believed Gülen to be behind the attempt while 32% pointed to Erdoğan (*Diken* 2016). However, a few months later, those believing the coup to be a Gülenist plot increased to between 71 and 95% in various polls (Oğur and Kenar 2017).

Notwithstanding AKP's discursive dominance and monopoly over the national media, the official narrative was not the only one. Responding to the pressure by Turkish authorities on the US to extradite him, Gülen denied any involvement and called for an independent international inquiry into the coup (2016). In the Gülenist narrative, 15 July was a staged coup, serving as a pretext for Erdoğan's self-coup (*autogolpe*) in the end. Accordingly, the coup was designed and successfully 'staged' to fail, with the only apt comparison as that of the '1933 Reichstag fire', allegedly instigated and used by Adolf Hitler to purge communist rivals (Fontanella-Khan 2016; AFSV 2017). In the wake of the coup attempt, similar arguments reverberated throughout social media, with the Twitter hashtag #TheatreNotCoup trending, as many assumed that AKP was responsible for the coup (Lusher 2016).

The opposition leaders Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Selahattin Demirtaş came up with a third narrative in which Erdoğan knew a coup was being planned, but allowed a 'controlled coup' to take place to justify further suppression of the opposition. In this light, the Republican People's Party's (CHP – *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) report to the Parliamentary Commission on 15 July was titled 'The Controlled Coup that was Foreseen, not Prevented, and Exploited' (CHP 2017). Without denying Gülenist complicity in the coup attempt, this narrative suggested a more complicated picture. Several observers challenged the government's description of 15 July as a purely Gülenist affair and cast blame upon an anti-Erdoğan coalition within the army, composed of Kemalists, ultra-nationalists and opportunists together with Gülenists (Gürcan 2016; Sadar 2016). In a similar thinking, some staunchly pro-AKP columnists argued that Kemalists were also behind the coup, but that the government maintained a singular rhetoric, so as not to divide the anti-Gülenist consensus (Kütahyalı 2017). The government's reaction to such alternative narratives oscillated between ignorance and repression while Erdoğan labelled the main opposition CHP as 'the main treason party that turned into a black propaganda centre of FETÖ' (*Yeni Şafak* 2017).

No matter who was truly behind the coup, Erdoğan took it, in his own words, as 'a gift from God'. He utilized the post-coup trauma to re-engineer the state and society. On 20 July 2016, the cabinet declared the first of a series of states of emergency (OHAL), which served as a tool of terror to suppress and deter any opposition. The post-coup crackdown went beyond punishing those involved in the coup and extended to the entire Gülen community, Kurds, as well as secular and liberal critics. Within a year, 169,013 people were subject to legal proceedings with blanket accusations of terror links and a further 50,510 arrested (*Hürriyet* 2017). The government also seized at least \$11 billion worth of corporate assets, the largest wealth grab in the country's democratic history. The European Commission raised concerns about collective punishment and 'guilt by association' due to the vague criteria applied to identify 'membership, attachment or association to the FETÖ/PYD' ('Fethullahçı

Terör Örgütüne (FETÖ/PDY) aidiyeti, iltisakı veya irtibatı belirlenen’), as phrased in the emergency decrees (2016, 9). Critics also pointed to various human rights abuses, such as dire prison conditions, systematic torture, suspicious deaths and forced disappearances. However, with the never-ending wave of arrests becoming less newsworthy each day, the deafening silence – casting all as bystanders to the ongoing injustices – only incentivized broader crackdowns on any segments of opposition. Ironically, the measures dismantling democratic institutions and putting the country in the grip of authoritarianism were justified in the name of saving Turkish democracy, as in the famous post-coup motto ‘Democracy has won’ (Karadağ 2016).

Turkey’s post-truth coup

Post-truth politics relies on the propensity of individuals to believe in what feels plausible and intuitively true. It exploits a motivated reasoning that sidesteps inconvenient truths. While releasing the cognitive burden on the neoliberal subject, it erodes the concept of evidence-based truth as a shared ground for political debate and undermines all foundations of reality and rationality. It is a broader phenomenon, but best manifested in and mostly associated with contemporary populisms.

Buttressed by the proliferation and fragmentation of news sources, post-truth leaders obstruct the pursuit of truth, attack credible sources of knowledge and inundate the mediascape with rumours, fabricated news and conspiracy theories, all serving (a) to create a fog in which one can only rely on common sense, and (b) to invent that common sense knowledge that is immune to facts. In this regard, post-truth politics signifies a shift from a regime of truth to a regime of common sense, in which gut-feeling, emotions and intuitions are seen as more reliable than facts to lead to the truth. This also re-fashions the vocabulary of contemporary politics by increasingly paving the way to emotion-driven narratives free from the confines of evidence-based facts. Post-truth politics, as shown in the case study of 15 July, processes postulations arousing sentiments of hate, rage, fear or patriotism, usually along with a rhetoric of crisis.

In the footsteps of Kemalist state- and nation-building, President Erdoğan aims to install 15 July as the founding myth of his ‘New Turkey’. In many ways, AKP’s narration of 15 July also follows the Republican tradition that draws on Sèvres Syndrome and employs the ‘recurrent cycle of conceptual patterns and associated roles – those of the “bigman”, selfless hero, and traitor’ in Turkish political culture (White 2015). Similarly, Kemalist Turkey was no stranger to conspiracy theories. Notwithstanding this continuation, AKP’s stance hardly resembles the high modernist, positivist and progressive Kemalism that founded the Turkish Republic in 1923. Instead, a bold disregard for truth, discrediting sources of evidence-based knowledge and an avalanche of emotion- and crisis-driven content informed AKP’s post-Gezi narrative and of 15 July in particular. In this endeavor, the party could be compared to its strange bedfellow: the contemporary anti-Western variant of Kemalist nationalism, called *Ulusalçılık* (Çınar and Taş 2017).

Thanks to its penetration of the state apparatus, AKP blocked discussion and investigation of the coup attempt, skillfully neutralizing contending narratives and pursued a common sense politics about 15 July. Once common sense is established, factual contradictions no longer seem to matter. For this reason, Erdoğan’s conflicting statements about when he first heard of the coup plot did not cast doubt upon his narrative as a whole. Likewise, the

alterations in the official story line (e.g., initially pointing to Colonel Muharrem Köse and then switching to the former Air Force Commander Akın Öztürk as the number one suspect and leader of the coup attempt, or shifting the focus of the narrative from the General Staff Headquarters to the Akıncı Airbase as the control centre of the putsch) did not elicit any second thoughts. In the same manner, whether *Yeni Şafak* editor Karagül claims that the US is the behind-the-scenes actor of 15 July or that German intelligence is instead to blame does not create a mass of blatant contradictions, but only reinforces the common sense knowledge about foreign involvement in 15 July (2016, 2017). This regime of common sense laid the ground for Turkey's path to authoritarian rule. Thus, it does not matter much whether 15 July, in fact, was a kamikaze coup, a staged coup or a controlled one. Instead, it is the way the government narrated the coup and handled its aftermath that makes it a post-truth coup.

Notes

1. The Gülen Movement is a transnational religious network guided by Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen, who resides in the United States. Whereas the movement has expanded across 170 countries through philanthropic works, scientific education and interfaith dialogue, its growing presence in Turkish civil-military bureaucracy and tug of war with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP – *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) raised questions about its overtly political motives. The government blamed the Gülenists for the abortive coup of 15 July. However, the official terrorist designation for the movement dates back to the National Security Council meeting on 26 May 2016 (Taş 2017).
2. Foucault presented the term 'regime of truth' in a 1976 interview. In his later works, he seems to have abandoned using it, relying instead on 'subjectivity'. Nevertheless, the term gained much attraction in subsequent decades despite the lack of further theorization (Weir 2008). This study follows Jayson Harsin in scrutinizing post-truth politics in light of the concept of 'regime of truth' (2015).
3. The term was first introduced by political commentator David Roberts to refer to 'a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)' (2010).
4. An ironic example is US President Donald Trump who counters accusations of fake news by reversing the term and dubbing critical media coverage likewise as 'fake news' (Schwarz 2018).
5. The arrest of investigative journalist Ahmet Şık, who maintained his critical stance towards the state-led narrative of the abortive coup, is quite illuminating in this regard (Sadar 2016). Jailed in 2011 for having written a critical book, 'The Imam's Army', about Gülen, Şık was now charged with 'propagating for FETÖ'.
6. Named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Kemalism is the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic and basically denotes Atatürk's revolutionary modernization project that targeted a wholesale transformation of state and society in line with Turkish nationalism and secularism. Various, even rival, political actors from the right to left have prescribed themselves as Kemalist. For a recent discussion of multiple Kemalisms and the Ulusalçı variant, in particular, see Çınar and Taş (2017).
7. One should still note that anti-Westernism also has its own roots in Turkish political Islam.
8. Sévres was the peace treaty that was imposed on the Ottoman Empire in 1920 after the First World War and envisaged the partitioning of the Empire along ethnic and religious lines.
9. Interestingly, Gülenists also accused the ruling elite for being non-national (*gayrı milli*) and claimed AKP is run by Bagratunis (*Pakraduni*), allegedly Jewish crypto-Armenians (Bostan 2016).
10. Despite the predominantly anti-Kemalist rhetoric in general, there were times when the AKP publicly embraced Atatürk, most recently in November 2017, when commemorating the 79th anniversary of his death.

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